

“Se conoce que usted es ‘Moderna’”: lecturas de la mujer moderna en la colonia hispana de Nueva York (1920-1940)

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Scholarship on the history and evolution of the Puerto Rican and other Latino/a communities in New York City has expanded significantly, spanning over half a century since the emergence of Puerto Rican and Chicano/a studies, feminist/women/gender studies, and other interdisciplinary fields of academic inquiry. However, considering the vigorous levels of scholarship in these fields since their inception in the early 1970s, there are still a few important historical sources that have not received the proper attention they deserve. Foremost is New York’s Spanish-language press during the first half of the twentieth century. A rich legacy of newspapers, magazines, journals, newsletters, and other periodical publications still remains largely untapped despite their unquestionable usefulness in revealing the issues, activities, conditions, and ideological positions that surrounded the daily lives of the various Latina/o groups in the city, and the wide range of female and male voices, their experiences, and subjectivities from a distant past. Among the best-known and long-lasting New York periodicals are *La Prensa* (1913-1963; and subsequently and to this day, *El Diario/La Prensa*), *Gráfico* (1927-1931), and *Artes y letras* (1933-1945)—all primary sources for María Teresa Vera-Rojas’ comprehensive study, *“Se conoce que usted es ‘Moderna’”: lecturas de la mujer moderna en la colonia hispana de Nueva York (1920-1940)*. Compared to the other two periodicals, the daily *La Prensa* had a wider circulation and a bigger investment capital base, and was more connected to the media technologies of mass communications and advertising of the period. The last two publications were of a much smaller scale. *Gráfico* aimed primarily at a working class community audience, and *Artes y Letras* at a more professional readership interested in lit-

erary and artistic expressions. Both are also closely associated with their editors: *Gráfico*, with Puerto Rican journalist, community activist, and cigar roller Bernardo Vega (1885-1965), who bought and edited the paper from 1928-1929; and *Artes y Letras*, with its Puerto Rican feminist founder, editor, and writer Josefina Silva de Cintrón (1895-1986).

Initial efforts to rescue Spanish-language periodicals from oblivion were propelled by the launch of the *Recovering the Hispanic Literary Heritage of the United States* project in 1992, headed by Puerto Rican scholar Nicolás Kanellos at the University of Houston. The project's success in identifying and recovering an impressive number of these publications in New York City and throughout the United States (see Kanellos 2011; Kanellos and Martell 2000) inspired Vera-Rojas and a few other scholars to engage in the rescue and critical analysis of the journalistic and creative writings of some of the most prolific authors of the city's *colonia hispana* published in these periodicals (see Acosta-Belén 1993; Colón 1993, 2001; Colón López 2002). Among Vera-Rojas' earlier publications were a series of scholarly articles rescuing, contextualizing, and analyzing the journalistic writings of a few of the most prolific women contributors to some of these periodicals. The author's initial interest in their writings began with her doctoral dissertation at the University of Houston, which collected and analyzed the scattered journalistic writings of Clotilde Betances Jaeger (1890-187?), grandniece of the nineteenth century Puerto Rican patriot Ramón Emeterio Betances, and a frequent contributor to the aforementioned and several other Spanish-language newspapers of the 1920s and '30s. In subsequent published work, Vera-Rojas also brought to public light the writings of another Puerto Rican woman regularly writing for the Spanish-language press, María Mas Pozo (1893-1981?), who besides her journalistic writings in these newspapers, also contributed as a reader submitting several letters of opinion to the "De nuestros lectores" section of *La Prensa* (see Vera-Rojas 2014, 2011-2012, 2010). Some of the most memorable journalistic writings of these two women are their published debates in the column "Charlas Femeninas" of *Gráfico* in 1929 (April 13, 20, May 18, June 8, 15, 22,), which addressed their different positions on and meanings of what constitutes being a "mujer moderna" or a "Mujer Nueva" within the context of their specific geographic and cultural locations, and undergoing rapid and dramatic social transformations

occurring in the modern cosmopolitan milieu of New York City during the post-World War I, Roaring Twenties era.

Both women journalists reappear in Vera-Rojas's new book—an insightful, well-documented exhaustive theoretical analysis of the extent to which discourses and visual representations of the modern or new woman introduced and propagated in the Anglo-American mainstream press and other media (i.e., Hollywood films, radio broadcasting). Generally embodied by the paradigmatic "flapper" female, these discussions of the contemporary woman of the time were also reproduced in the Spanish-language periodicals selected for her study. By extracting from the aforementioned newspapers, articles written by women journalists and those taken from regular columns and pages targeted to a female audience (e.g., "Charlas Femeninas" in *Gráfico*; "Para la mujer" in *La Prensa*), along with letters from women readers, photographs and other illustrations, and advertisements, the author appraises the influence of heavily publicized Anglo-American representations and paradigms of beauty, fashion, and behaviors of the modern woman on "las mujeres de la colonia hispana," in order to analyze the process and forms of subjectivization that intervene in the experiences of femininity of these readers. Vera-Rojas skillfully and at length shows that as readers of these publications and responders to the content of the frequent articles and columns aimed at a female audience, these women's subjectivities reveal "la conjunción, reapropiación y resignificación" (p. 17) of broadly circulated paradigms and representations of femininity and the modern woman in mainstream U.S. society, and their negotiations with the norms, traditions, and restrictions exerted by their own cultures and communities.

During the period at hand, dominant discourses, representations, and paradigms of what it means to be a modern woman were circulated by consumer and marketing patterns and strategies of the mainstream English-language press and other prevailing media of the period. These ideas and images were also partially reproduced in the Spanish-language press, both visually and discursively to women consumers through targeted advertisement and columns or pages focused on women's beauty, fashion, products related to health and hygiene, and new technologies to improve housework, women's bodies and physical appearance. The author considers as well as the content of letters these women readers sent to these newspapers, and

the journalistic articles written by regular women contributors to the three selected newspapers. This occurred in part as a response to the need of these community newspapers, especially the smaller ones, to acknowledge the “modernizing trends” of the times and appeal to a larger number of readers within the “*colonia hispana*,” but also to increase their own advertising revenue by opening their pages to U.S. companies and businesses seeking to promote their products and further boost their profit margins by extending their marketing efforts to the city’s various ethnic communities.

Veras-Rojas’ new book both reflects more recent research interests on new and dissident subjectivities and sexualities that challenge binary constructs of women’s representations, identities, and discourses about femininity and feminism, while giving continuity to her earlier scholarly interests in women’s writings in the Spanish-language press. This latest study stands out first, for making an important contribution to what is still a scarcity of research on the lives, experiences, and subjectivities of “*las mujeres de la colonia hispana*” (at the time, mostly Puerto Rican women, followed by a visible presence of Spanish and Cuban women and a smaller sector of women from a wide range of other Latin American/Caribbean nationalities) during the first three decades of the twentieth century; and, second, for its solid theoretical framing and incisive and sound critical analysis to demonstrate that the subjectivities and identities of these women were far from being monolithic. On the contrary, through the various chapter discussions, the author makes frequent theoretical detours to remind readers of the heterogeneous, contradictory, and intrinsically complex nature behind the constructions of identities and processes and forms of subjectivization. Some of these contradictions are exposed by the numerous discursive and visual examples she carefully extracts from the three selected newspapers. These include articles written by women (and a few men) authors on issues of femininity and feminism, the nature and character of women, their role in the public and private spheres, women’s individual freedom and various social and cultural constraints, and being members of society at a time of significant modern transformations but, when compared to men, still subjects of unequal treatment and limited rights in multiple areas.

The sequence of the various book chapters begins with intricate theoretical expositions about the presence of women in newspapers, as writers,

readers, and subjects, with numerous references to the cultural and gender studies literature dealing with the power and control of the mass media industry in a consumer society such as the United States, in regulating and marketing the construction of women identities and bodies, and in circulating imaginaries and paradigms of the "modern woman." These theoretical interventions are a prelude to formulating and contextualizing the particular actual "experiencias de modernidad y subjetivación de las mujeres hispanas." Chapter Two shifts the focus to the readings and readers unearthed from the three different Spanish-language periodicals; all claiming in some way to be "portavoces" of the concerns and cultures of "la raza" or "la colonia hispana." Of particular interest are the ways in which *Artes y Letras* manages to blend "feminismo, hispanismo, and ciudadanía" (p. 112), largely due to the feminist outlook of its prominent founder and editor, to become a defender of "la raza hispana," women's equality, and, as stated by the author, a more positive and strategic approach to "la liberación e identidad de la mujer moderna" (p. 112).

The first part of Vera-Rojas' book title ("Se conoce que usted es 'Moderna'") is explained at length in Chapter Three, "Imaginarios de la Mujer Moderna." The remark is part of a response to a question posed to Aimée, the woman in charge of the section "Consultorio de belleza" of the weekly *Gráfico* by one of her readers (published in the June 15, 1929 issue, page 10). As the title of Aimée's column indicates, this printed space was open to women readers to visit and consult by sending letters seeking advice or answers to their beauty-related inquiries and problems, which were then regularly answered in the newspaper. This particular reader wanted Aimée to tell her if there was a problem in changing the color of her face. The first part of the columnist's answer was the written interjection: "Su problema es muy nuevo y se conoce que usted es 'Moderna.'" Aimée's reaction to and implicit assumption about the reader's question, was that there was nothing wrong with wanting to darken your skin color, either by using natural sun rays or sun lamps at the beauty parlor (also an assumption of the reader's whiteness). Her response gave a seal of approval to this reader's potential transgression of old-fashioned norms of beauty and beautification practices, now being facilitated in modern society by new products and technologies (in this case, the sun lamp). Answering a different question from another reader

worried about the propriety of not wearing stockings in the summer and thus being perceived as antisocial, Aimée, again, seizes the defiant women's spirit of the times: "No se preocupe del qué dirán. Sea una individua y no una esclava de la tradición" (pp. 151–2).

Both Chapters Three and Four follow a similar pattern of theoretical contextualizing and discerning analysis, this time focusing on the socioeconomic, political, and cultural transformations, and also the capitalist modernizing drive during the World War I postwar decades, after the achievement of women's suffrage validated more than seven decades of prior struggles for voting rights, more freedoms, and equal treatment. Suffrage increased women's visibility and participation in the nation's socioeconomic, political, and cultural life during this period. All of these rapid changes also led to new imaginaries about what it meant to be a modern woman in terms of beauty, fashion, behavior, and bodies, and the author deftly examines how these new imaginaries are regulated and controlled in a capitalist mass consumer culture. Vera-Rojas' theoretical incursions look at the way new technologies regulate and propagate norms of femininity and different aspects of women's corporal beauty (Chapter IV), and also promote consumption are of interest to specialists in these fields, even when occasionally they sidetrack readers from the main focus of her study—that is, to problematize the intricate forms of subjectivization that intervene in the experiences of femininity of "las mujeres hispanas de la colonia," and the ways in which these women negotiate the ideas, representations, and paradigms of modern women in Anglo American society with the norms, traditions, and restrictions of their own native cultures and communities.

Cultural contradictions among "las mujeres de la colonia," about what it means to be a modern woman sharing two different cultural contexts, as well as their diverse positions on a variety of women-related issues, become more evident when Vera-Rojas focuses in Chapter Five on the content of Betances Jaeger and Mas Pozo debates, which discussed divergent views on women's newly acquired rights and freedoms, their roles in the domestic and public spheres, and as individuals and social actors subject to the traditions and values of their cultures and communities and the influences of mainstream U.S. society and the "American way of life." The two authors were central to the debates about the notions of "la Mujer Moderna" or "la

Mujer Nueva" because of their published debates and original articles about the role and rights of women in the domestic and public spheres, as read in *Gráfico* in 1929. There were obvious ideological differences and standpoints between the more progressive Betances Jaeger, a defender of equality between the sexes and individual freedom, and a more conservative Mas Pozo, who rejected the trivial aspects of modernity and the modern woman in US society and was critical of what she perceived as a frivolous obsession with beauty, fashion, and consumerist practices. At the same time, Mas Pozo was also subscribing to more traditional views of women's moral duties and role as protector of the family and household, and "suprema artista que modela las almas" (p. 301). Thus, these two women were also very much attuned to ongoing discussions about the changing roles of women during the post-World War I years and the multiple implications for the present and future of women, their families, their communities and nations, and, indeed, all of humanity in a changing world.

In the book's introduction, the author had initially addressed the importance of the widespread presence of the "flapper" in the pages of *Gráfico* as a paradigm of the modern woman. A more detailed discussion of this character is the focus of Chapter Six. Of particular interest is the section on the "flapper latina" and her subversive performances. This acculturated version of the "flapper" was heavily criticized by Jesús Colón and a few other male writers as an exaggerated and caricaturesque version of the Anglo-American original. Thus, the numerous visual representations and allusions to the "flapper" in *Gráfico* illustrate the contradictions between the defense of more traditional roles and values of "las mujeres de la colonia hispana" by some of the weekly's male editors and writers (such as Alberto O'Farril, Erasmo Vando, Bernardo Vega, and Jesús Colón), who were often critical of the values and behaviors of Anglo-American modern women, and their potential harmful influence on the community's women, while the newspaper itself repeatedly publicized these images.

The theoretical considerations that frame the analysis and argumentation in some parts of Chapters Five and Six cogently reveal the complex, contradictory, and fluid aspects of the discourses and representations that influence the formation of subjectivities and identities. Nonetheless, it was unfortunate that some of the numerous photographs and illustrations in-

served in the various chapters were often too small in size and hard to fully appreciate, partly due to the less than adequate visual quality of the microfilm originals. It would have meant adding a few more pages to the book, but the publisher should have recognized the need to enlarge some of this visual material because of the overall importance and centrality of some of these images. In closing, Vera-Rojas demonstrates once more that the Spanish-language press represents an invaluable source for researchers. The media of the time enables us to grasp the wide range of issues, concerns, viewpoints, and numerous cultural, political, and social activities that engaged the early *colonias* and *barrios* built by Puerto Ricans and other Latina/o nationalities during their formative stages. Thus “las mujeres hispanas,” as readers of Spanish-language newspapers, become modern consumers and negotiate, re-appropriate, or resignify hegemonic discourses or influences to “modernize” their personal appearance and domestic and social lives, or to become a modern woman. These social changes involve class, race, and ethnic considerations and distinctions that the author is quite cognizant of. In her concluding remarks, Vera-Rojas reminds readers that “pensar a las mujeres hispanas como sujetos modernos no [es] solo pensar la feminidad como una experiencia moderna, sino, sobretodo, inscribir la subjetividad de las inmigrantes hispanas como parte de los cambios y las experiencias que han dado forma a la modernidad” (p. 368).

Scattered, sometimes incomplete or blurred by the microfilming process or the poor quality of the original, and still mostly neglected, many of the columns, editorials, creative literature, photographs, cartoons, and ads in these periodicals, provide indispensable threads for weaving the story of individual and collective lives of the “*colonia hispana*” and its external interactions with the New York City environment, and the respective countries of origin of its diverse population at different historical moments. Drawing on a vast array of sources, with this study Vera-Rojas makes it clear, once again, that these periodicals are indispensable. They allow us to reconstruct and preserve a historical memory of the origins and evolution of the presence, productive lives, and experiences of Latinas/os in the United States and for assessing their import to their present and future conditions and challenges.

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